

## TRIBAL IDENTITY AND CONFLICTS WITH TRIBES

BY

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# USAWC STRATEGY RESEARCH PROJECT

## TRIBAL IDENTITY AND CONFLICTS WITH TRIBES

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## **ABSTRACT**

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As the United States enters the 21<sup>st</sup> century a “new” enemy has emerged to replace the “old”, viz., communism and the Soviet Union. The Cold War is over and many would argue that the need to plan and/or prepare for major combat operations is an archaic way of moving forward. While I don’t necessarily espouse this view I do believe that the preponderance of conflicts in our nation’s future will be against foes of a tribal nature. As such, it is not likely that these tribes will possess the assets or size of a nation-state. Understanding the tribal foe, their culture, and unique identity will be critical to strategic success for the United States. Our nation must be willing to meet the enemy on their terms and as we evaluate their values and cultural identity we must also evaluate ourselves. We must not fall victim into believing that all tribal enemies are the same because they speak the same language, look the same or are located on the same continent. Understanding the enemy to this degree will allow for greater success during the conflict or be able to avoid conflict altogether.



## TRIBAL IDENTITY AND CONFLICT WITH TRIBES

A nation must sometimes pursue its strategic objectives by conducting military actions in all types of scenarios. Unknown conditions, threats, and foes require military leaders to ask a critical question: "What will Warfare in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century look like?" For example, will the warfare of the future mirror previous major wars of our relatively young nation or will it reflect what several perceive as a growing trend: countering non-state actors in the world environment. Whether warfare assumes a more traditional form or becomes more asymmetric, it is crucial to understand the enemy - in other words, know what makes the enemy tick. With that goal in mind, it now becomes necessary to examine the structure of potential non-state groups in order to identify any cultural differences that may lend an advantage in any diplomatic or military action to settle a conflict. A good place to begin the assessment is to ask, "Is the foe tribal in nature? If so, what type of tribe are they (e.g., ethnic, racial, political, lifestyle, class, economic, etc.)?" The likelihood that our future adversaries may be tribal peoples is great. Unfortunately, our military has not been very successful in combating tribal foes in the past.

This paper addresses the impact tribes pose to the future of conflicts by first offering guidelines for a working definition of "tribe". Second, it provides case studies to highlight our weaknesses and shortcomings in dealing with tribal foes. Third, it briefly reviews the types of warfare employed by tribes. Fourth, it surveys the world's tribal cultures in an effort to identify "tribal trouble spots" so that combatant commanders can prepare for likely engagements with tribes. Finally, the paper concludes with recommendations to improve our understanding and interaction with tribal cultures.



## What is a Tribe?

In approaching tribal warfare one must understand what a tribe values and how to best exploit this knowledge. In short, we must learn how to exploit tribes' weaknesses and strengths. This knowledge is critical to effectively engage any enemy, especially a tribal one. We should begin with a working definition of "tribe" that enables us to assess an enemy to determine their social structure. While this seems an easy task (after all, we all seem to know what a tribe is), the concept of "tribe" assumes many forms according to current usage. Consider the following accepted definitions:

1. The tribe is the most ancient form of social organization...A tribe is small. It consists of personal, face-to-face relationships, often of blood. A tribe is cohesive. Its structure is hierarchical. It has a leader and a rigid set of norms and customs that define each individual's role. Like a hunting band, the tribe knows who's the top dog and knows how to follow orders.<sup>1</sup>
2. Tribes are generally defined as autonomous, genealogically structured groups in which the rights of individuals are largely determined by their ancestry and membership in a particular lineage. Tribes are essentially adaptive social networks organized by extended kinship and descent with common needs for physical and economic security.<sup>2</sup>
3. The good notion is: in tribes, like find like. People know who they are. They build trust. People in these figurative tribes live by shared memories and stories...tribes provide company and security where it matters.<sup>3</sup>
4. Tribe may be used loosely of a localized group in which kinship is the dominant idiom of organization, and whose members consider themselves culturally distinct (in terms of customs, dialect or language, and origins); tribes are usually politically unified, though not necessarily under a central leader, both features being commonly attributable to interaction with states. Such tribes also form parts of larger, usually regional, political structures of tribes of similar kinds; they usually do not relate directly with the state, but only through these intermediate structures.<sup>4</sup>

Given these various definitions for a tribe, one may become enmeshed in the particulars of the definitions without ever succeeding in determining whether a prospective enemy is a tribe or not. A working definition of a tribe should focus on its

shared values and language. Tribes are also bound by their resiliency, a vital strategic characteristic. They may or may not have a prominent figurehead (e.g., chief, warlord, etc.) and they are not bound by geographical limits. In sum, a working definition should stipulate shared values, common language, group cohesion, and tribal trans-nationalism.

The above group characteristics provide a good starting point towards defining a tribe and most are largely self-explanatory. However, group resiliency requires further explanation. Group resiliency highlights the fact that tribes possess the uncanny ability to lie inactive or disperse until they are able to regroup. For this very reason, Iraq's Sunni, Kurdish, and Shiite tribes are likely to resume their previous ways (warfare) after U.S. security forces withdraw. The Bosnian and Serb tribes likewise have resumed their hostilities in the Balkans. The following anecdote is revealing: Colonel Lee DeRemer, USAF, a faculty professor at the U.S. Army War College, was engaged in a wide-ranging conversation with Serbian military members when the NATO, European Union (EU), and U.S. peacekeeping missions came up in conversation. A Serbian soldier declared, "We'll take economic or military aid from any country willing to provide it to us, but the EU is the only entity that has an impact on peace. On your (EU) departure we will likely go back to our previous ways – fighting."<sup>5</sup> As is the case with many of our allies and enemies, it seems to be common knowledge that a key to success in a battle with a democratic state (in particular, America) is to merely wait it out. Tribes are particularly adept at this. As a democracy, American society does not seem to possess the patience to fight a protracted engagement. This lack of commitment makes it difficult to win a long-term conflict, particularly if American casualties mount with no immediate,

tangible results to show for the losses. United States strategy for engaging tribes militarily must acknowledge tribal resiliency.

Another term requiring explanation is geographic dispersion. According to this term, tribes are not bound to any particular geographical locale. Al Qaeda and Jewish Diaspora both provide current examples of tribal groups that are not bound by geography. This does not imply that geography or particular geographic landmarks may not play a great role, or invoke powerful emotions for a particular group. Rather, geographic constraints are not as important as they have been in past wars. Globalization through modern technology (cell phones, internet/computers, and varying types of media) and ease of travel (land, sea, and air) has introduced unprecedented fluidity to recent conflicts.

Leadership is another issue. Although many tribes have a prominent - and agreed upon – leader, the Iroquois Nation provides an excellent example of tribes governed by committee. Their confederacy consisted of six tribes that shared governance of the coalition. Their committee makeup was, arguably, the model for our own Constitution. Regardless, their rule by committee prevented power from falling into the hands of one person.<sup>6</sup> A single, dominant leader may very well have participated, but this leader deferred to the group and its various committees. In formulating a working definition of tribe, the military should recognize that tribes may indeed have a participatory government.

Shared values, common language and resiliency are the essence of a tribe, while a dominant leader and geographic proximity are not. Given these definitions, why then do individuals belong to a tribe? A tribe offers security that takes priority over anything a

Western, post-industrial society may value, such as democracy, freedom, and human rights. Tribalism offers a clearly separatist view of the world: “Us vs. Them”, “East vs. West”, “Pagan vs. Christian”, or “Believer vs. Infidel.” These concepts are not explicitly embedded in American society or social thought. Given the historic measures used in U.S. immigration policies and, of course, the assimilation of Native Americans in the early 1900’s, Americans assume a nationalistic identity. In short, Americans, by our very virtue of being an American, abandon our “tribes” when we “become” an American. Without tribal concepts as part of our identity, we have struggled to fight effectively against enemies we fail to identify with or understand.

A tribe offers a sense of belonging that creates incredible solidarity. A tribe offers the top three basic needs of Maslow’s hierarchy:

1. Physiological: biological – food, water, comfort
2. Safety/security
3. Needs of love, affection and belongingness<sup>7</sup>

So what is missing in this equation? After all, a democracy offers these basic needs, and tribes around the world do not seem to be converting to democracy on any significant scale. The missing element could be “meaning” or a common tribal “identity.” This is different from what a state offers such as being an “American” or a “German.” While both are proud of their heritage, national designations do not provide the same “meaning” or “identity” that a tribe offers. As Americans, we struggle to understand tribal mentality and these struggles lead to lessons re-learned as we engage the next adversary falling into a tribal structure.<sup>8</sup> In fact, to say that we as a nation are relearning lessons is actually being overly euphemistic. Our previous lessons learned are more

accurately lessons observed, but rarely assimilated. The U.S. military is notorious for its after action reports (AARs) and its talk about lessons learned. But are they really learned?<sup>9</sup> Our military leaders must understand this tribal mindset, not only from previous lessons, but also in the formulation of predictions of tribal behavior in the future. Of the 42 U.S. designated foreign terrorist organizations (FTO), the majority are tribal in their basic structures. Most notably (those commonly publicized in the news today) are Hezbollah (14), Hamas (12), and al Qaeda (33).<sup>10</sup> Clearly, the tribal enemy looms large in the foreseeable future. So the nation, and our allies, must consider how tribes think. Recognizing the mask that a particular tribe wears (religious, political, ethnic, etc.) is the first step.

One of the issues the nation clearly has difficulties with is seeing things as our enemies see them. This is not to say that we should lower ourselves to their “barbaric” standards (though that is an option.) Rather we should attempt to understand why they do what they do.<sup>11</sup> It is hard to be empathetic with a group that hunts down and tortures members of another group - particularly when both groups have the same language and similar customs and rituals, such as the Hutu’s recent genocidal slaughter of the Tutsi’s in Rwanda. Indeed we cannot comprehend a foe that is willing to rape children in front of their enemy’s families or cut off the arms of their children basically because they belong to another tribe - their sworn mortal enemy. Our own Civil War is not so far removed, yet many of us are unwilling to resort to the tactics employed by some Union leaders and soldiers to preserve the Union. Our culture, political will, and international law will not permit our military to use methods sometimes required to combat people on a level they resort to, can understand, and even respect.

A shortcoming of American foreign policy may be that it is not uncommon for our leaders to believe that, if a label can be placed on a foe, then they are likely to understand what they are up against. Consider the term “communism.” If the U.S. were to engage in an armed conflict with Tito, Castro, or Ho Chi Minh, would the nation employ the same tactics and strategies because they are all communists? Their motivations and objectives were vastly different, so treating them as the same type of opponent would be disastrous. To use another example-- if we went into battle with a preconceived notion of how an “Asian” conducts war, we might get lucky and be successful. But treating a Korean, Japanese, or Indian foe as the same Asian enemy would also be disastrous. Strategic stereotyping is a prescription for defeat. Every tribe has similarities, but it’s the differences our strategists must understand. We must anticipate what that particular tribe may be bringing to the field should conflict erupt.

Two cases illustrate our vulnerabilities in combating a tribal enemy structure. They also show how the country failed to retain lessons observed in previous encounters. Though neither one of these were considered “failures”, in today’s strategic environment, a 25 year war is not acceptable, particularly if it is fought on foreign soil.

#### Case Study I – The Plains Indian Wars 1865-1891

After the American Civil War, renewed energy among Americans resulted in a great migration westward. Caught in the middle were the Native Americans. The conflict of cultures between the “older” Americans and their “newer” counterparts eventually led the indigenous Americans to one of two options – surrender or fight. When the new Americans began destroying the Native Americans primary source of livelihood, the buffalo, many Native Americans chose to fight for survival, rather than surrender.<sup>12</sup>

The typical scenario consisted of: settler intrusion, Indian reaction, and the U.S. Army counteraction with superior force. Oddly enough, the Army often found itself protecting the Indians from settlers, as well as the other way around. One of the features defining the Indian Wars was the adaptability of the Army's officer corps. There were two prevalent schools of thought - those who approached the Indians with a sense of respect and learned the unorthodox methods of their ways and those who viewed the Indians as savages and placed their faith in the methods used in the Civil War.<sup>13</sup> Given this situation, the effectiveness of an officer resided in his individual effort and initiative. There was nothing in their formal education, training, or doctrine to guide their conduct in these Indian Wars. If learning was something to be gleaned from their comrades it was done so through word of mouth.

It took the Army over a quarter of a century to subdue the majority of Indian tribes west of the Mississippi River. Two tactics proved to be the decisive turning points in the Indian Wars. The first was the use of Indian scouts as guides for U.S. troop movements. For example, "Crow and Arikara scouts served throughout the Army searching for and fighting against the Teton Sioux."<sup>14</sup> The second was the Army's implementation of reservations. Reservations served to isolate tribes from one another, thereby minimizing the potential for tribes banding together en masse.<sup>15</sup> However, once confined to reservations, the buffalo was near extinction, the Indians were dependent upon the government for subsistence. This may not have been a great strategy for the U.S because it raised issues of trust responsibility—since the government was obliged to care for the Indians. Substandard care further alienated Native Americans and eventually led to unrest – the American Indian Movement (AIM) during the 1970s was

marked with particularly violent demonstrations. Issues of sovereignty and trust responsibility remain even today. It is apparent that the U.S. failure to appreciate tribal connections made this “victory” a costly one.

### Case Study II – The Philippine Insurgency

Towards the end of the Spanish occupation of the Philippines, the U.S. gained an ally in the rebel leader Emilio Aguinaldo. But, he would eventually become the chief adversary to the U.S. This reversal was caused by our military leaders’ failure to understand Aguinaldo: The straw that broke the camel’s back was designation of the individual responsible for seizing Manila from the Spanish.<sup>16</sup> Aguinaldo’s desire to be the symbol of victory over Spanish oppression mattered a great deal. When U.S. leaders failed to acknowledge his heroic contributions, he turned against them.

Superiorly trained U.S. forces eventually abandoned conventional tactics and waged guerilla warfare. Aguinaldo was initially successful in attacking the towns that supported the U.S. forces, then blending in with the local populace. Rebel fighters also outnumbered the U.S. troops by roughly two or three to one and they used the familiar jungle environment to minimize any U.S. advantages.

But eventually the insurgency collapsed because it lacked focused leadership and shared goals. Further, the local populace’s reaction to the insurgents’ intimidation, extortion, and the slaughter of local inhabitants accused of being friendly to the U.S. turned the people against the insurgency. Finally, the insurgent’s Revolutionary Army was poorly trained. Together these issues led to the U.S. forces defeat of the insurgents.



The U.S mounted a fairly robust operation, providing a myriad of services and amenities the local populace had not seen before. Gradually, the U.S. soldiers acquired a deeper understanding of the Filipino people. Filipino groups, villages, and factions reacted differently to various U.S. tactics and incentives, but the U.S. soldiers began to make the most effective choices. This adaptability was a direct result of recent experiences gained during the Plains Indian Wars; most of the senior Army leaders deployed to the Philippines had garnered several of their warfighting skills, in these wars.

This operation was “the U.S. sole unequivocal counterinsurgency success”<sup>17</sup> and it highlights several important issues involving tribal warfare. The lessons carried over from the recent Plains Indian Wars provided a solid foundation for leaders of the Philippine Campaign. However, it is true that ‘there is no substitute for experience’ and therefore, it is difficult to capture experience in doctrine. In fact, 26 of the 30 officers who served in this conflict had Indian War experience.<sup>18</sup> Even with all this invaluable experience, the Philippines campaign was a four year undertaking, leading some to note that tribal conflicts are neither simple nor short-term affairs. Tribal conflicts take time - time that often tasks the limits of our patience (as a society), absorbs resources, costs lives, and consume vast amounts of money.<sup>19</sup> Again, this victory was achieved in *only* four years – largely due to the experience of the officers who had served in the recent Plains Indian Wars. Their efforts to gain support of the populace and to isolate the population from the insurgents through the use of concentration camps (reservations), and their decision to ration food came from lessons learned in the Plains Indian Wars.

Ironically, if U.S. leaders fully understood the Filipino insurgents' culture, knew what really mattered to them, and acted accordingly, the whole affair may have been avoided in the first place. Part of the warrior ethos that mattered a great deal to Aguinaldo was to be the symbol of victory for his people by leading the Manila seizure from the Spanish.

### The Way Ahead

Though both of these cases ultimately (and arguably) provided a victory for the U.S., at some point our ability to simply outlast our opponents will not be adequate to ensure victory. These cases also clearly demonstrate that tribal encounters are time-consuming undertakings. Also, lessons observed from previous tribal encounters may appear entirely different in nature when they are really quite similar. The tactics may be different, but the underlying tribal culture is the same.

Should the nation now concentrate solely on tribal responses to conflicts and the DoD abandon strategic planning for Major Combat Operations (MCO)? No, this would not be prudent. The looming threat of a nuclear-capable Iran, a hostile North Korea, or an aggressive China resisting the sovereignty of Taiwan all warrant thorough analysis and planning for an MCO scenario. However, the preponderance of future conflicts will likely involve non-state actors – particularly, non-state, tribal actors. Understanding tribal cultures is especially important in the formation of U.S. Africa Command (USAFRICOM). As we consider USAFRICOM's area of responsibility (all of Africa excluding Egypt),<sup>20</sup> it becomes readily apparent that a majority of the region's countries host a number of diverse tribal cultures intertwined with nation-states. Further, since many of the colonial boundaries do not align along tribal boundaries, tribal warfare will

be waged both inside and across national boundaries. Since USAFRICOM's mission is to focus on war prevention - versus war fighting – it will seek to build regional security and crisis response capacity able to cope with a myriad of challenges and create a stable environment while increasing diplomatic, economic, and humanitarian aid assistance.<sup>21</sup> To accomplish this mission, USAFRICOM must engage tribal groups constructively and effectively. How a particular tribe views warfare, what it values, and how best to solve tribal issues are critical issues. These concerns make it imperative that the USAFRICOM format (thorough integration of military, Department of State, and other assets) is both viable and successful. USAFRICOM must establish a solid foundation for all elements of the DIME<sup>22</sup> to interact as one cohesive unit. Embassy staffs and Country teams are better positioned, than our military personnel, to understand the local populace's attitudes and feelings throughout an African country. We can ill-afford to allow states to fail in any region that has the potential to serve as safe harbor or a training ground for FTOs. The African continent possesses vast natural resources (uranium, oil, and diamonds are but a few), raising the potential for exploitation. It is clearly in our national interest to keep our finger on the pulse of any potential instability. A few of the African nation's providing challenging examples are; Chad, Nigeria and Mauritania.

There are over 200 tribes located within the geographic boundaries of Chad, and the four largest comprise nearly 45 percent of the total population.<sup>23</sup> Possible instability within Chad illustrates the need for thorough knowledge of tribal culture in order to initiate effective diplomacy or military action. Nigeria hosts somewhere between 250-400 distinct tribes and Mauritania's population are almost 100 percent Muslim. These

are only three of the 53 countries in Africa that will fall under the jurisdiction of USAFRICOM,<sup>24</sup> but they all present similar tribal issues requiring very different approaches. As with the “communism” and “Asian” examples cited earlier, U.S. leaders cannot treat all African “tribes” as the same to achieve our national interests.

Consider also, recent events in Kenya. A mosaic of 40 tribes, Kenya had enjoyed decades of stability and apparently avoided the fate of several of its neighbors – Somalia, Ethiopia, Sudan, and Rwanda. Then suddenly, “Within the span of a week, one of the most developed, promising countries in Africa has turned into a starter kit for disaster.”<sup>25</sup> What would cause one tribal group to barricade women and children in a church and then set fire to it burning the church to the ground and killing everyone inside of it?

### Types of Warfare

As in the case studies previously discussed, the countries falling within the realm of USAFRICOM, and other opponents such as the 42 FTOs are all predisposed to irregular warfare (IW). IW is defined as “a form of warfare that has as its objective the credibility and/or legitimacy of the relevant political authority with the goal of undermining or supporting that authority. IW favors indirect approaches, though it may employ the full range of military and other capabilities to seek asymmetric advantages, in order to erode an adversary’s power, influence, and will.”<sup>26</sup>

Unless the tribal adversary approaches the size of a nation-state, with resources to match, the U.S. will be involved with IW in the preponderance of foreseeable scenarios. However, without acquiring an understanding of the true nature of a given tribal adversary, then the country is failing in its preparation to engage a potential

opponent. As in our previous examples, we must not fall victim to treating all enemies the same merely because they fall into the IW category. Suffice it to say that IW, guerilla, and terrorist tactics are all merely tools in the tribal warriors' tool box. This analysis does not include consideration of the best ways to counter various IW tactics. Rather, it emphasizes the challenge of knowing the users of such tactics.

That said, there is a common element that appears to offer a good starting point for engagement. In waging IW, we need to be able to garner support from the civilian populace, both at home and in the area of conflict. Lack of home-front civilian support has led us to rely heavily on technology to 'win' our battles and minimize human losses. However, without the human element on the ground, chances for success in a tribal arena are slim. While all tribes may not possess a dominant figurehead, giving the enemy a face and meeting them on their perceived terms is critical to success. Tribes respect a warrior ethos, and their resiliency enables them to erode their enemy's will through a long drawn-out engagement of attrition. The Counterinsurgency Field Manual (3-24) identifies a critical requirement; go into the field and learn how people are related, that is - accomplish a social network analysis.<sup>27</sup> This effort to focus on the people rather than the enemy is a great first step towards understanding potential adversaries, but it falls short of identifying tribal nuances and underlying cultural issues – both theirs and ours. At no time in any joint doctrine or other policies do we find the need to examine our own American principles, views, and beliefs. These documents assume that the nation understands itself so thoroughly that it does not need to reexamine the nation's core values as it enters into a conflict. However, the country unquestionably does need to reevaluate its own values before it attempts to impose its will on someone else.

Specifically, are the American people prepared to support a protracted IW campaign against a tribal foe in a distant land that presents no immediate threat to the U.S. homeland?

Once we've determined the type of tribal foe the nation faces, then we need to understand that, even more so than with other adversaries, a tribe must be provided an honorable way to end the conflict. Perhaps we can allow a tribe to declare it victorious, thus saving face, even though our nation has accomplished its goals. Americans routinely espouse their views, on their terms, and expect others to meet them. With tribes this may be exactly the wrong course of action. If the nation truly wants to solve a meaningful issue, then it needs to consider putting aside certain views and meeting the tribe on their terms. With such a concession, you can then negotiate terms suitable to both sides, perhaps settling the conflict. We have an incredible history of tribal wars going back thousands of years; they offer useful lessons. Alexander the Great, Lawrence of Arabia, and the current conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan all provide tribal examples to be gleaned for future tribal conflicts. Elements leading to success in the first two of these instances were assimilation, separation of the people, and gaining their support. Our operations in Afghanistan and Iraq have produced no solid, meaningful, satisfactory outcome. As for lessons learned, they have provided nothing but lessons of what not to do. Actually, that may be an overly pessimistic statement because our cultural awareness in Iraq is much greater now as soldiers are returning for their second or third tours. However, we have the benefit of a prolonged conflict that allow for this type of learning curve. With the emphasis, again, on understanding the enemy prior to conflict, the nation will recognize two immediate benefits; first, if conflict does erupt we

reap the benefits of understanding our enemy from the beginning – not well into a prolonged war; secondly, this understanding may prevent an escalation of hostilities in the first place.

The recent American experience in Afghanistan actually poses other issues for the nation, even more than other recent – or perhaps future - engagements. Afghanistan people define their affiliations in terms of Qawm or Qoam.<sup>28</sup> This “them-and-us” concept is really found no where else in the world. According to this concept,

. . . The social structure of communities is based either on the tribe (where kinship relations determine social organization and basic political alliances) or the locality (where people identify themselves in terms of common place). Tribal organization uses common descent through the male line to define membership and is most characteristic of the Pashtuns and Turkmen who maintain elaborate genealogies that extend back to a common ancestor. Identification by locality is most characteristic of the Tajiks who have a common language (Persian) and religion (Sunni Islam) but make no claim that they share any overarching kinship links. Among some groups that are nominally tribal, such as the Uzbeks, only clan affiliation remains while groups like the Hazara that have a tribal structure are more likely to identify themselves through their common Shia religion that sets them off their neighbors. Tribal peoples who move to the cities tend to lose their kinship links and identify by locality over the course of a few generations. Whether based on locality or descent, Afghans call all of these groups qawm, a wonderfully flexible term used that indicates ‘us’ as opposed to ‘them’.<sup>29</sup>

Since the Western translation of qawm is “tribe” it becomes even more understandable that a detailed knowledge of potential adversaries is important for effective conduct in future conflicts. Dr. David Katz reports “I feel, however, that we lose more than we gain when we take that term from our use of it and apply it in Afghanistan where it doesn't have an equivalent and leads us to misperceive social structures and relations.”<sup>30</sup> Whether they are a tribe or a qawm, they have unique attributes that are critical to meaningful, effective engagement. Identifying a tribal foe, where it is appropriate, and fine tuning regional specifics from that tribe is merely a starting point.

## Genocide, Separation or ?

As previously mentioned, gaining the populace's support is important to winning a tribal war, but that alone is not enough to win – it is also merely a tool. Although some claim that the only historical examples of victory against a tribe are genocide and separation, they are not the only options. Genocide does not mean the total annihilation of the tribe, though that is one path to take. Merely disrupting a tribe's structure and cohesiveness permanently may suffice. The remainder can be assimilated into the conquering culture. The problem with this “partial” genocide is that it is easy to go “too far” once that option is initiated. What percentage of the tribe must be eliminated before a nation can, or must, stop? Further, if enough of the enemy is not eliminated, the conflict will resume at some time in the future with a more determined foe.

However, neither of these options are serious choices for a nation like the United States, with enduring moral and legal values and a humanitarian agenda. Separation is somewhat like sending children to their separate rooms when they are fighting. It works for a while, but in the long run the only way to avoid future conflicts is to keep them separated or be prepared for a long peacekeeping mission. In an arena where the Crusades seem to have happened yesterday – another example of a tribe's patience outlasting their enemy's lack of long-term vision - separation seems to be short-sighted method with the inevitability of future conflicts. The effectiveness of either of these choices can be pondered as we consider the fate of American Indians. Whether or not the U.S. has successfully integrated them into our society through selective genocide or managed to keep them separate enough to avoid conflict is clearly debatable.



## Conclusion

Most would agree that it is in fact important to know your enemy, but to what degree and at what level of detail? Should it be at the level of - corps commander, division commander, brigade commander, battalion commander, or smaller? Certainly, the people doing the fighting must know, or be aware of, what the desired outcome is so they can engage in operations effectively. Whether this is accomplished through the Commander's Intent or some other manner depends on the situation. More importantly, we need to know what motivates a particular group so we can reap several benefits. In the first place, we should seek to avoid conflict during pre-hostilities - the shape-and-deter phase. Convincing a foe not to fight or negotiating a peaceful resolution to prevent hostilities is obviously preferable to war. A second concern is post-hostilities - stability operations and transfer to civil authorities. Few countries, if any, can match the U.S. military in technological or numerical superiority, but as we've seen, this doesn't necessarily equate to long-term success. Simply destroying the enemy or eliminating their supporting infrastructure may not be an adequate method to achieve our overall strategic aims. In Vietnam, for instance, we never lost a battle with the North Vietnamese Army (NVA) – they simply were no match for us. However, we lost the war in large part due to Viet Cong (VC) guerilla and insurgent tactics. The VC did not behave like a “standard” army and eventually won over the heart and minds of the people – turning the populace against the South Vietnamese government. The U.S. never settled on effective tactics to counter the VC or came to the realization that this enemy was simply different than other enemies we had met before.

As seen in the case studies and current conflicts, long-term U.S. success depends considerably on support - both in the area of operations and domestically. This support

would go a long way in sustaining operations and bringing them to a successful conclusion. More importantly, though, is the fact that there are times where the nation must meet the potential enemy on his terms. A tribe may have a history of “trading” daughters with other tribal leaders to maintain or establish peace, and we find this socially reprehensible, but this should not mean we view them as savages and treat them with little regard or respect. It is not always the correct or even best option to impose this nation’s moral values on potential adversaries. Certainly, not every tribe either craves or desires a more democratic form of governance; some tribes may, in fact, view such governance as a threat to their very existence or at least alien to its culture.

Tribes operate outside modern political, economic, and military systems. They are enduring and can withdraw from engagements for long periods, while an army cannot. When an army disbands and re-forms later, it is a different army. However, when a tribe disbands and re-forms sometime later, it is the same tribe. Tribes have an innate ability to “wait out” the enemy. As previously mentioned tribes engage in certain types of conflicts that the U.S. simply does not know how to fight. Can an enemy endure defeats and still be successful? In Napoleon’s era, a war was won or lost based on the outcome of one major battle. Today the U.S. has all but eliminated al Qaeda in Iraq, along with its leaders. But al Qaeda remains a threat. How can this be? Al Qaeda is not the people making up the group, but it is an identity that extends beyond its people and Iraq’s borders. It is in fact critical that the U.S. understands that all enemies have a people behind the enemy; we must get to know their culture and identity. Just as the U.S. was mystified by the Japanese in WWII – nothing prepared the nation for fighting an enemy

that would fight to the death even when all hope was lost - so will we continue to be mystified as the enemies of the future use the most innocent among them (women, children, handicapped, etc.) to carry out their objectives.

The proliferation of global connectivity and the potential to draw on lessons learned or observed from previous operations (counterinsurgency, insurgency, tribal wars, etc.) lend themselves to a thorough understanding by current military and civilian leaders. There is clearly much more to be gained from developing a thorough understanding of previous operations throughout the history of recorded conflicts. While such knowledge is a minimum requirement, it provides an excellent starting point - a starting point that will lead to a better, more comprehensive understanding of the nation's potential tribal foes in the future. Whether such knowledge contributes to a successful pre-hostilities phase or lays the groundwork for a successful post-hostilities phase, the tribal adversary looms large. We must strive to understand such traditional people and their cultures. And we must better understand ourselves.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Steven Pressfield, "Tribalism Is the Real Enemy in Iraq," *Seattle Post Intelligencer*, 18 June 2006 [newspaper on-line]; available from [http://seattlepi.nwsource.com/opinion/274138\\_focustribes18.html](http://seattlepi.nwsource.com/opinion/274138_focustribes18.html); Internet; accessed 3 November 2007.

<sup>2</sup> U.S. Department of the Army, *Counterinsurgency Field Manual 3-24* (Washington D.C.: U.S. Department of the Army, 15 December 2006), 3-4, 3-5.

<sup>3</sup> Martin E. Marty, "Fending Off Tribalism, Jews Argue Self-Definition," *Los Angeles Times*, 27 November 1988, p. 2.

<sup>4</sup> Richard L. Taylor, *Tribal Alliances: Ways, Means, and Ends to Successful Strategy*, Strategy Research Project (Carlisle Barracks: U.S. Army War College, August 2005), 3.

<sup>5</sup> Col Lee DeRemer (USAF), interview by author, 19 December 2007, Carlisle, PA.

<sup>6</sup> Charles C. Mann, "The Founding Sachems," *New York Times*, 4 July 2005 [newspaper on-line]; available from [http://www.nytimes.com/2005/07/04/opinion/04mann.html?\\_r=2&n&oref=slogin&oref=slogin](http://www.nytimes.com/2005/07/04/opinion/04mann.html?_r=2&n&oref=slogin&oref=slogin); Internet; accessed 5 January 2008.

<sup>7</sup> Janet A. Simons, Donald B. Irwin, and Beverly A. Drinnien, *Psychology - The Search for Understanding* (New York: West Publishing Company, 1987), available from <http://honolulu.hawaii.edu/intranet/committees/FacDevCom/guidebk/teachtip/maslow.htm>; Internet; accessed 9 December 2007.

<sup>8</sup> Don't mistake this with a belief that I think tribes offer a better way of life than that which we value. Simpler yes, but not necessarily better. The democratic society we thrive in is fantastic and has evolved over several hundred years. But it is not for everyone and must be wanted before a group can make the leap from tribalism to nationalism and finally to a democracy.

<sup>9</sup> We observe them and we talk about what we did wrong and how to make it better the next time, but we do not integrate it into our doctrine or even pass it along to the next commander in a consistent manner. There is no formal mechanism in place to ensure lessons observed are incorporated where applicable or passed along the chain of command to be gleaned for others to reference. It would seem that these superficial actions taken are born out of fear of failure or "covering their six" so the legal claim can be made that something was in fact done and then they can move on to the next issue or problem.

<sup>10</sup> U.S. Department of State, *Fact Sheet* (Washington D.C.: Office of Counterterrorism, 11 October 2005), available from <http://www.state.gov/s/ct/rls/fs/37191.htm> - The numbers in parentheses represent the current ranking, from 1 to 42, in alphabetical order of the FTOs

<sup>11</sup> When the U.S. military has had momentary lapses of what the nation considers "unconscionable acts" we have paid the price. Abu Ghraib and waterboarding are recent examples of incidents that not only outraged the home front and soured world opinion towards America, but refueled terrorist causes around the world.

<sup>12</sup> Richard W. Stewart, ed., *American Military History Volume I: The United States Army and the Forging of a Nation, 1775-1917* (Washington D.C.: U.S. Army Center of Military History, 2005), 321.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 326.

<sup>14</sup> Dr. Clayton K.S. Chun, *US Army in the Plains Indian Wars 1865-91* (Osceola: Osprey Publishing, 2004), 18.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 17-18.

<sup>16</sup> Ivan Khilko, "The Philippines (1899-1902)," in *Money in the Bank: Lessons Learned from Past Counterinsurgency (COIN) Operations* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2007), 7.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 11-12.

<sup>19</sup> Today's environment is particularly susceptible to the cost issues where Iraq and Afghanistan is costing somewhere between 12 and 15 **billion** dollars a **month**.

<sup>20</sup> *United States Africa Command Home Page*, available from <http://www.africom.mil/AboutAFRICOM.asp>; Internet; accessed 19 December 2007.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> The DIME (Diplomatic, Intelligence, Military, and Economic) is an acronym used to describe U.S. elements of power being brought to bear in pursuit of the national interest.

<sup>23</sup> U.S. Central Intelligence Agency, *The World Factbook* (Washington D.C., 2007 and 1991), 117-120 and 59-60. Note: The 2007 edition no longer uses "tribal" entities within a country, but the numbers match up with the 1991 version that used a tribal format for the "Ethnic Division" section.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 117-120.

<sup>25</sup> Jeffrey Gettleman, "Kenya, Known for Its Stability, Topples into Post-Election Chaos," *New York Times*, 3 January 2008, pp. A1, A6.

<sup>26</sup> David L. Grange, "Developing Irregular Warfare Leaders for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century," *National Strategy Forum Review* 16 (Summer 2007): 5.

<sup>27</sup> U.S. Department of the Army, *Counterinsurgency Field Manual* 3-24, 3-5.

<sup>28</sup> Dr. David Katz, interview by author on 4 January 2008, Carlisle, PA. Dr Katz received his PhD in Anthropology based on field-work he conducted in rural Afghanistan in the mid-1970s. He works for the State Department, has recently returned from a second tour in Afghanistan, and is currently an instructor with the Naval War College.

<sup>29</sup> Thomas Barfield, *Afghan Customary Law and Its Relationship to Formal Judicial Institutions* (Washington D.C.: U.S. Institute for Peace, 26 June 2003), 2-3; available from <http://www.usip.org/ruleoflaw/projects/barfield2.pdf>; Internet; accessed 4 January 2008.

<sup>30</sup> Dr. David Katz, e-mail message to author, 3 January 2008.